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AN

HISTORICAL SKETCH

OF THE

FIRST CHURCH

IN

ROXBURY.

James de Normandie,

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by James De Normandie.

1896.

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CITY OF BOSTON

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THE FIRST CHURCH IN ROXBURY.

HISTORICAL SKETCH.

There stands in the middle of Eliot Square, Roxbury, a venerable edifice, perhaps the finest specimen of the Puritan meeting-house remaining in New England. All the religious associations of this colony from 1631 to 1773 cluster around this spot; and for a long time it was the place of worship for the inhabitants included in what is now Roxbury, Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury, together with many of the settlers in Brookline.

Within the last twenty-five years the population of Roxbury has increased so rapidly that great numbers are living within a circle of a mile or two from the old church, knowing nothing of its history, — thousands of whom, we think, might come to be interested in its past, its present, and its future.

The first house of worship, like so many of its kind in the new colonies, was built of logs, with a thatched roof and a clay floor. It was about twenty by thirty feet, and twelve feet high; and the settlers at Brookline paid one-fifth of its cost. The first houses were built along the street now bearing the name of the town, and there was a regulation that every one must build within half a mile of the meeting-house. This

building stood from 1632 until 1674. The second house of worship was much larger, and answered its purposes until 1741.

A new and larger one was then erected, but it was destroyed by fire in 1746. The fire caught, the records say, from a foot-stove; and some thought it was a divine judgment upon the love of ease and luxury which was creeping into the settlement. For until this time the fire of devotion was the only warmth the old meeting-house had through the long services, although some of the worshippers would take their dogs to lie on the floor, while they put their feet upon them, the better to endure the winter's cold. Many of the customs of these early days seem very strange to our generation. As there was no fire, the church was regarded as the safest place to keep the powder of the settlement, and sometimes it was stored in the steeple, sometimes on the beams of the roof; and occasionally, if a thunder-storm came on during the time of public worship, the congregation would leave the altar, and take shelter in the neighboring woods for fear of an explosion. Sometimes, in seasons of abundant harvest, the farmers were allowed to store their grain in the loft of the meeting-house; while notices of every kind of meeting, orders and resolutions of the town, summonses to town meetings, intentions of marriage, copies of the law against Sabbath-breaking, announcements of vendues and sales, lists of the town officers, rules about the Indians, were posted on the house, sometimes covering it well over, while it was

no unusual thing for the freshly severed head or heads of wolves to be nailed under the windows to attest the skill of the hunter or prove the reward due him. Close in the rear of the meeting-house were those guardians of the peace and terrors of evil-doers, — the stocks and pillory, — where the offenders were placed within full view of the innocent. There was no bell, but the willing congregation gathered at the call of a drum or shell. As an old verse has it: —

"New England's Sabbath day
Is heaven-like, still, and pure,
When Israel walks the way
Up to the temple's door.
The time we tell
When there to come
By beat of drum
Or sounding shell."

The prayers were frequently an hour long, the sermons of even greater length, measured by an hour-glass, when clocks and timepieces were rare; and it is told of one of the ministers of New England that, when the sands were run out, he would look over his sleepy congregation, and say, "Come, friends, let's take another glass."

The fourth house of worship was built in 1746. Of this we have a plan; and, as it was like the preceding one, we know the precise style of the meeting-house in which our fathers worshipped a hundred years ago. The entrance was from the south side, and the pulpit opposite upon the north. Directly in front of the

pulpit was a goodly number of free seats; and among the names of the occupants of the square pews we read these, still frequently met with among our citizens or perpetuated by our streets: Curtis, May, Seaver, Bowles, Crafts, Williams, Heath (of Revolutionary fame), Ruggles, Dudley, and Joseph Warren, who fell at Bunker Hill.

The population had so increased that it was thought the time had come to provide meeting-houses in the more remote parts of the town, so that in 1712 a second church was gathered in what is now West Roxbury; and in 1773 was erected the present old church, now standing on Centre Street, near South, although partly destroyed by fire a few years since. This is the church that was made famous by the ministry of Theodore Parker. From this, as well as from the mother church, still another parish was formed in 1769, which is now the First Congregational Society of Jamaica Plain, quite near to the Soldiers' Monument.

It may be some reassurance to those who think that the interest in public worship is declining that a record in 1820 says: "The interest in religion had so far declined that, although there are in the first parish in Roxbury, completed and building, three churches within the compass of a few rods, those who prefer to spend their Sabbaths in regular worship to lounging about taverns and pilfering in the fields but half fill a single one."

The fourth house of worship of the First Church,

INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH, LOOKING TOWARD THE PULPIT.

from 1746 to 1804, saw the stormy days of the Revolutionary War. The lawn was the camping ground of our forces. Here Washington came to review the troops. General Thomas had his headquarters in the house long occupied by the eminent teacher, Mr. Dillaway, the gambrel-roofed building still standing on Roxbury Street. The steeple was shattered by British cannon-balls. And Whitefield preached to one of his immense congregations in front of the church.

Early in the present century a movement was begun to build a new church, the fifth on the historical spot. The records tell us that the committee was to consult the plans of the church in Newburyport, then just finished; and the tradition is that Bulfinch, the architect of the State House, had something to do with them. Whoever were the architect, the builders, and the committee, the result was one of the most satisfactory, commodious, and beautiful of all the old meeting-houses in New England; and with its massive timbers it gives good promise of fulfilling the purposes of worship for another century. Its fine proportions deceive one as to its great size; while its large, roomy, and comfortable pews, its most gracefully hung and spacious galleries, — above all, its perfect acoustic properties, in such marked contrast with almost all modern churches, — and the simplicity of its whole finish, together with the associations of devotion for almost a hundred years, make every one feel at once that this is no hall, no lecture platform, but a church of the living God, fragrant with the sentiment of worship for

generations. The house was dedicated on the 7th of June, 1804; and the first Sunday services were held on the 10th of June. Fortunately, all schemes of remodelling, by which many old churches have been defaced if not ruined, have always been defeated here by a wiser judgment. There was a good deal of objection on the part of some to so costly and elegant a structure, as is shown by a note in a private journal, which, under date of April 18, 1803, says: "This day the meeting-house in the first parish of this town was begun to be pulled down. It was not half worn out, and might have been repaired with a saving of $10,000 to the parish. It has been sold for $600. Whether every generation grows wiser or not, it is evident they grow more fashionable and extravagant."

But the church knew what it was about; and when the sale of pews took place in the new house, after all the building expenses were settled, there was a surplus of nearly $8,000, which was divided *pro rata* among the tax-payers of the parish, and from that time until the present the church has not had a cent of debt.

At this time the population was increasing, so there was a demand for churches of other sects; and on Nov. 1, 1820, the Baptist church in Roxbury, which is now called the Dudley Street Baptist Church, was dedicated. This was quickly followed by the dedication of the Universalist church on Jan. 4, 1821; and so, one after another, as adherents of the various faiths settled here, churches have been built to meet the

needs of a hundred thousand inhabitants. In 1846 a second Unitarian church was gathered on Mount Pleasant, which is now the flourishing All Souls' Church on the corner of Warren Street and Elm Hill Avenue.

When the first settlers came to this neighborhood, they found their way for a few months to the church which had already been gathered in Dorchester; but in 1631 they formed their own church, under the lead of William Pinchon, of whom the record says, in 1630, "He was one of the first foundation of the church at Rockesborough"; and perhaps the church was gathered in that year, for Eliot came in 1631, and before he left England he had promised friends who had preceded him to be their minister in Roxbury. However, we have not been accustomed to speak of our church as established at an earlier date than 1631. In July, 1632, Thomas Welde was invested with the pastoral care of the church in Roxbury. In November of the same year John Eliot was ordained as teacher with him. No matter how small the parish, it was customary to have pastor and teacher; but very often it was hard to separate their offices and duties. Mr. Welde was the first minister of this church, and remained until 1639. He was very prominent in all the ecclesiastical affairs of this and the surrounding colonies, a stern Puritan, a good fighter for his own views, and an uncompromising antagonist of those who differed from him, and, as he thought, threatened the faith, peace, and purity of the church. It was the

spirit of the age to enforce by every argument or legal enactment the religion which the reigning party regarded as true. There was but one true religion, and the true one for those days was extreme Puritanism.

The ministry of John Eliot from 1632 to 1690 so overshadowed that of Welde that, while the latter was no inconspicuous figure in the early history of New England, the former is often spoken of as our first minister, almost to the entire neglect of the able, faithful, scholarly, but extremely bitter and dogmatic Welde.

John Eliot, the apostle to the Indians, is the most commanding figure among all the noncomformists of England who came to this country for freedom of worship. His name and ministry are the glory of our church, as they would be of any church in Christendom; and his life is one about which every young person should know something. He was born in 1604, at Widford-upon-Ware, a typical English village not far from London, educated at Jesus College, Cambridge, and for a time was an inmate of the house of Thomas Hooker, afterward the founder of the State of Connecticut. His early years were, as he says, "seasoned with the fear of God, the Word, and prayer"; and in the family of the pious Hooker he "saw, as never before, the power of godliness in its lovely vigor and efficacy." The struggle between the Puritans and the English church was growing so bitter that Eliot made up his mind to come to this country; and in November, 1631, he arrived at Boston. In

Despite of the earnest desire of the church in Boston, which had been gathered in 1630, to settle him as its minister, he determined to keep his promise to his friends at Roxbury; and here he began in 1632 his long, eventful, and remarkable ministry. He watched over his flock, small indeed, but rapidly increasing, like a faithful shepherd. The atmosphere of every home was well known, and any lapsing brother or sister was brought to the open confessional or banished from the settlement. No papal inquisition was ever keener than the Puritan's watch for heresy or for sin, but a tender love was mingled with the careful scrutiny. If you read between the lines of his records, you see what a yearning sympathy breathed in all his official or private ministry. Here was a man to whom the unseen things of the Spirit were more real than all that could be handled or touched. In homes where he was a familiar and welcome guest, he would say: "Come, let us not have a visit without prayer. Let us pray down the blessing of Heaven upon your family before we part." Finding a merchant with only books of business upon his table and books of devotion upon a shelf, he said: "Sir, here is earth on the table and heaven on the shelf. Pray don't sit so much at the table as altogether to forget the shelf. Let not earth, by any means, thrust heaven out of your mind." Mather says he heard him utter these words upon the text, "Our conversation is in heaven": "In the morning, if we ask, Where am I to be to-day? our souls must answer, In heaven: in

the evening, if we ask, Where have I been to-day? our souls may answer, In heaven. If thou art a believer, thou art no stranger to heaven while thou livest, and, when thou diest, heaven will be no stranger to thee: no, thou hast been there a thousand times before." Here comes out in his record the stern hope of the church about erring brethren who publicly confess their wrong in the church: "And we have come to hope that the full proceeding of discipline will doe more good than theire sin hath hurt." And here is his watchfulness over the morals of trade: "The wife of William Webb, she followed baking, and through her covetuous mind she made light waight, after many admonishions flatly denying that after she had weighed her dough, she never nimed off bitts from each loaf, which yet was four witnesses testified to be a comon, if not a practis, for all which grose sins she was excommunicated. But afterward she was reconciled to the church, lived Christianly, and dyed comfortably." He had also the first Sunday-school in the New World; and his interest in education led to his founding our Latin School, now for two centuries and a half one of the best fitting schools for our neighboring university.

It was, however, as the apostle to the Indians that he has honor throughout the Christian world. Eliot had hardly begun his work in the ministry here, and mingled with the red men whom he saw every day in the village streets or skulking behind the trees as he walked along the paths, when the thought came to him

that these men as well as the English were children of God, and to them also the gospel should be preached. He believed — and it was not an uncommon opinion in his day — that these Indians belonged to the lost tribes of Israel; and he also believed that in their language he would find some traces of the Hebrew, which Eliot believed was the language of heaven by which God had spoken to Israel. We cannot here trace that wonderful missionary life; but no human labors were ever more earnest, devoted, and self-sacrificing. In his house, a modest mansion which stood just back of where the People's Bank now stands, he had an evening school for the Indians; and during the week, or when he could have a spare Sunday for longer journeys, wherever the Indians could be gathered in wigwams or under the spreading trees, down along the Cape, all through Western Massachusetts and up to the borders of New Hampshire, there Eliot was to be found. In journeyings, in perils, in fastings, no difficulties seemed too great, no thought of self came to the surface, every personal comfort was surrendered, every sacrifice gladly borne; and then he would come back, and through the long night, by his tallow candle, give himself to the translation of the Scriptures into their language with a diligence which shames almost all records of scholarship. His charity became a proverb, so that Cotton Mather says, "he that will write of Eliot must write of his charity or say nothing." Thus he labored on until with the burden of years he could hardly make his way up to the old

meeting-house; and once, with feebleness and weariness, leaning upon the arm of his deacon, he said: "This is very like the way to heaven, 'tis up hill; the Lord by his grace fetch us up," and, spying a bush near by, he added, "and truly there are thorns and briars in the way, too." So says one of his biographers: "I might suggest unto the good people of Roxbury something for them to think upon as they are going up to the House of the Lord." His missionary zeal was not less than Saint Paul's, his charity was as sweet as that of St. Francis d' Assisi, and his whole life a testimony that the call to saintliness has not ceased and the possibility of it has not died out.

Eliot had two colleagues during his long ministry, — Samuel Danforth, 1650–1674, and Nehemiah Walter, 1688–1750. Danforth died at the early age of forty-eight, yet he had become a preacher of some repute and of acknowledged force. Walter's ministry exceeded even Eliot's in length. He was one of the most distinguished scholars and preachers of New England, and Dr. Chauncy regarded him as one of the most brilliant of Americans. There is probably no church in New England where through so long a line of preachers the standard of scholarly and pulpit gifts has been so high, and none which has had such a proportion of acknowledged leaders in the community.

Thomas Walter, son of Nehemiah Walter, was his colleague from 1718 to 1725, and Oliver Peabody had a very brief ministry, from 1750 to 1752. Then came

Amos Adams, the patriot minister during the stormy days preceding the Revolutionary War, from 1753 to 1775. He had a very plain way of telling the people of their sins, so that they grew restless under his personal attacks. The unsettled condition of the country during the war seems to have reached the church; and there was no minister until 1782, when Dr. Porter was ordained. He was an acceptable and devoted pastor for fifty-one years. It was during his settlement that a great change in theology swept over the New England churches; and Dr. Porter, following the preaching of Dr. Channing, led this church into that movement with hardly a dissenting voice. In common with all the Unitarian churches of America, it has no creed, regards fidelity to duty as more important and saving than assent to a prescribed belief, and accepts the faith of Jesus, holding with him that the essential religion is love to God and love to man.

Next to Dr. Porter came the crowning ministry of Dr. Putnam, from 1830 to 1878. A whole generation treasures the sacred inheritance of his word; and by common consent he stands unsurpassed, hardly equalled, for impressive eloquence among the clergy of New England. John Graham Brooks was his colleague and successor, from 1875 to 1882, and James De Normandie became the minister of the church in 1883.

Of the rural characteristics of Roxbury, as well as the central interest held in the First Church, even so lately as at the ordination of Dr. Putnam, a glimpse

may be obtained from what he says of that event: "It occurred on a week-day, and occupied the entire day. There was a procession, an array of marshals and ushers, and a dinner or banquet at the close. A numerous council was organized of ministers and lay delegates from far and near."

Thus in a period of two hundred and sixty-five years this venerable and distinguished church has had eleven ministers, and four of them cover the unusual term of two hundred and nineteen years. It is a record of which the whole community has just reason to be proud. What a beautiful story of how for so many generations worshippers have here sought and rested upon the eternal realities!

"We love the venerable house
Our fathers built to God:
In heaven are kept their grateful vows,
Their dust endears the sod.

"And anxious hearts have pondered here
The mystery of life,
And prayed the eternal Spirit clear
Their doubts and end their strife.

"From humble tenements around
Came up the pensive train,
And in the church a blessing found
Which filled their homes again."

The real value of the church, however, is not in its past, but in its desire and ability to minister to the religious needs of to-day. One of the serious diffi-

culties of the religious world at the present time is the struggle not so much for purity of doctrine or life as to support the numerous churches of the various sects, which makes the expense of worship a burden and cripples many needed philanthropies and charities. The remedy is not in building small sanctuaries, which even by the most generous gifts of their worshippers cannot support an able ministry, but in larger houses, where, by reason of accommodation for greater numbers, the burden may be slight for each one. Most of all is it necessary that the real life of a Christian church should be free from all sensationalism, from all that stimulates unwholesome excitement, and that it should rest upon the decency and dignity of worship, and the constant presentation of the few great spiritual realities which have ever been and must ever be the refuge and support of the human soul.

This is the church we would have ours to be in the centuries to come, as it has been in the past; and we think there are hundreds of new families among this large and growing population of Roxbury who would be glad to become sharers in all the tender and hallowed associations of the past and fellow-workers for its best life in the present and the future.

NOTE.— The foregoing historical sketch has been prepared as a means of bringing to the attention of those to whom it may be sent the past history and the present character, condition, and aims of the First Church in Roxbury. The illustrations which accompany the sketch show the exterior and the interior of the church edifice; the appended order of Sunday services shows the character of the weekly meetings for worship; and the monthly bulletin, enclosed in the pamphlet, indicates, in a general way, the nature of the religious, social, and philanthropic activities of the church and society. The seating capacity of the church building is large, its acoustic properties are perfect, and the society is wholly free from debt.

In sending out this pamphlet, we desire to say, in behalf of the First Church in Roxbury, that visiting strangers will be welcomed to our Sunday services, and that we shall be glad to receive into permanent association with us any who find these services helpful and attractive, and who feel themselves to be in sympathy with our views and aims.

DEPENDENCE S. WATERMAN,
JAMES C. DAVIS,
S. EVERETT TINKHAM,
Standing Committee.

ROXBURY, March 20, 1896.

INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH, LOOKING TOWARD THE ORGAN.

ORDER OF MORNING SERVICE AT THE FIRST CHURCH IN ROXBURY.

Beginning precisely at eleven o'clock.

ANTHEM.

INVOCATION. *All rise.*

ANTHEM OR CHANT.

SCRIPTURE LESSON.

HYMN. *Congregational.*

PRAYER.

ORGAN OR CHOIR.

HYMN. *By choir.*

SERMON.

SHORT PRAYER. *Concluding with the Lord's Prayer, which all repeat together.*

HYMN. *Congregational.*

BENEDICTION. *Amen by the choir.*

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